



# STATE OF MICHIGAN STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

#### **PREAMBLE**

#### **OUR TIMES**

The Michigan State Board of Education recognizes the importance of providing a safe, nurturing, moral, learning environment in which our children can acquire a quality education. We applaud those students, teachers, administrators, parents, and citizens who make a quality education possible. However, we are alarmed with the deterioration of civility in some of our schools, the use of inappropriate and objectionable language reflecting a lack of respect by some students for others and for proper authority, a decline of personal responsibility and self discipline, and the prevalence of violence which shreds the social fabric of our culture. Our fears are confirmed by brutal statistics and personal tragedies in our schools, homes, and communities.

The 1995 Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that in some schools one of every five children carries a weapon to school and one-third of the students were in a physical fight during the previous twelve months. Twenty-two percent of the students surveyed reported seriously considering suicide during the previous twelve months. We are in the grip of a moral crisis, a crisis of individual character.

We are also alarmed at the lack of understanding of our historical and political foundations. According to the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress study, six out of seven eighth graders across the United States are not proficient in their understanding of American history, and thirty-nine percent are unaware of even the most basic facts. Fifty-seven percent of high school seniors across the United States score "below basic" in their knowledge of American history. Too many have failed to learn our founding principles and the moral framework that sustains our experiment in constitutional self-government and makes possible our political prosperity. Our body politic is in the grip of a political crisis, a crisis of the American character.

#### **OUR FOUNDING HERITAGE**

George Washington, in his farewell to the nation two centuries ago, reminded us that religion and morality are indispensable supports for political prosperity and that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. He went on to say that a sincere friend to such a popular government cannot look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric and that, therefore, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge must be promoted. Our Michigan Constitution includes Washington's sentiments; our public and independent schools are such institutions.

Washington's concern was so great regarding the knowledge and practice of such morality







necessary to our social fabric that in his first inaugural address he emphasized that the foundation of our national policy would be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality. There is no truth more thoroughly established, he continued, than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness [and] between duty and advantage. Thus, he continued, we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained. Perhaps most important, Washington knew and said that the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.

We The People ratified our current Constitution, an improvement on our first effort thought Washington, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.

Washington explained in his farewell that this constitutional government has a just claim to our confidence and support because it is the offspring of our own choice uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision for its own amendment.

On the battlefield at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln reminded us that this American experiment, which is entrusted into all of our hands, deserves our support and confidence because it is founded on the central idea first articulated in the Declaration of Independence, that We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

#### EMBRACING ALL IN THE DREAM

Washington and Lincoln, however, understood that the Constitution did not possess a just claim for confidence and support for all Americans when ratified. Yet, the principles of the founding enabled our nation to progress so that all might strive to live the American Dream. Susan B. Anthony called upon the spirit and the letter of the declarations of the framers of this government, every one of which was based on the immutable principle of equal rights to all, to win women's suffrage. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed at the Lincoln Memorial, that when the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, we are still striving to fulfill his dream that all children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.









Some may continue to argue that we are too diverse a society to articulate a set of common principles both individual and American. To the contrary, while we celebrate our diversity, we cherish, as did Washington, Lincoln, Anthony, and King, the unifying themes and beliefs of our American character. We are diverse because we can be -- we, unlike many other nations, strive to extend the blessings of freedom, first established in our founding, to all.

To the doubtful, we respond with the words of Thomas Jefferson in his first inaugural address: every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We are a people, he said, enlightened by a benign religion, professed indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man. Embodied in our constitutional order and the Declaration of Independence are the ideas that make our nation exceptional and our society worth renewing in each generation. For our nation to endure we and our children must know and cherish these ideas reflecting the American character and practice the virtues which Washington and future generations knew were necessary to sustain our understanding in self-government.

#### THE NEED TO ACT

In the face of the challenge of our times, we must strengthen and renew our understanding of good character and the American idea. Like the founders and countless others who shed their blood, risked their lives, or otherwise struggled to make our nation free and just, we must strive to ensure that coming generations understand our American heritage, the necessary virtues to sustain it, and gain in the knowledge necessary to be good citizens. Therefore, we, the Michigan State Board of Education, hereby enact a policy on Character Education.







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### **POLICY ON CHARACTER**

The United States of America is exceptional in the world having started from a revolutionary event, and defining, through its founding documents, its very reason for existence. The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, with its first ten amendments forming the Bill of Rights, establish the foundation on which this nation was built and continues to develop as it adjusts in an ever-changing world.

From George Washington's 18th Century statement that our national policy would be ". . . laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality," to Frederick Douglass' mid-19th Century's "truth is proper and beautiful in all times and in all places" to Bertrand Russell's 20th Century view that "Without civic morality communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value," learned people have thought about these issues -- and we should learn from them.

But to learn is not enough. Our actions must reflect the words we use in defining American character. Each of us, in different ways, must teach coming generations what we believe and what we understand. American character transcends the politics of the day and defines the broad framework within which our lives are lived.

The Constitution of the United States of America guarantees freedom for all of us through the delineation of individual and collective rights and responsibilities. While we recognize the diversity of beliefs and practices of our citizens, the successful governance of this country depends on the principles of character that Americans hold in common. These principles transcend religious beliefs and are the foundation for an orderly and civil society.

Principles such as respect, responsibility, caring, trustworthiness, justice, civic virtue and citizenship determine the character of our people and the tenor of the society in which we live. The formation of character, both individual and societal, is the responsibility of all of us. Education has a direct impact on the development of character in our citizens.

As we prepare for the 21st Century, it is essential that all students find high level educational opportunity in safe surroundings. Each learner has inherent value and purpose, which must be nurtured to discover opportunities, raise expectations for their own lives and encourage the hard work necessary to reach their goals. Preparation for adulthood as an active participant in society, recognition of an individual's responsibility for his or her own actions, caring for and empathy with others, all contribute to civility among people. All of our associations, relationships, communities, and institutions must encourage and support these and other attributes of good character.

Therefore, the State Board of Education, in partial fulfillment of its Michigan Constitutional responsibility to provide leadership to public education, hereby empowers and encourages public schools to provide character education in a safe setting conducive to learning, based on the principles of our governing documents, including the principles of the First Amendment and maintaining the separation of church and state.



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